**Advantage GM in Europe**

**David Cronin**

**BRUSSELS, May 18 (IPS) - Leading biotechnology companies have been granted privileged access to the European Union's policy makers as part of their efforts to speed up the approval of new genetically modified (GM) crops.**

With opposition to GM foods high across this continent, the biotech industry has long been frustrated with the obstacles it has encountered in placing its products on the market. In a confidential 2006 letter, the trade association EuropaBio warned José Manuel Barroso, the European Commission president, that the political situation "might greatly diminish" its ability to prove its theory that cultivating GM crops is in the public interest.

Following that letter, EU officials agreed that a series of meetings should be held with EuropaBio on issues relating to new GM crops. Known as "tripartite meetings", the process also includes the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA), the body tasked with assessing whether releasing GM seeds into the environment poses a risk to human health.

While giant chemical and agri-business companies such as Monsanto, Dow, DuPont and BASF have been represented at these talks, no comparable access to decision-makers has been granted to critics of the biotech industry.

"There are strong indications that the European Commission puts its relationship with industry before its relationship with people standing up for nature and people's rights," Adrian Bebb, a campaigner with Friends of the Earth, said. "This partnership between the Commission, EFSA and industry is far too close and sometimes is not in the public interest. The Commission wants to go ahead and push more crops on Europe; its agenda is very similar to the industry's agenda."

Unlike many of the EU's 27 governments, the Commission -- the bloc's executive arm -- has been eager to lift the Union's de facto ban on planting many GM crops. During 2009 the Commission tried -- without success -- to prod France and Greece into ending the moratoria they had placed on Mon- 810, a type of corn developed by the world's most powerful seed company Monsanto. And in March this year, it chose a potato known as Amflora as the first GM crop to be approved for cultivation in the EU in 15 years.

Internal documents, obtained by IPS, also demonstrate that EU officials have been providing advice to the biotech industry on how to avoid problems when seeking to have new crop varieties approved.

Robert Madelin, head of the Commission's consumer protection department until last month, wrote to EuropaBio in November 2009, suggesting that applications for crop approvals made by its firms should contain more detailed data than they tended to.

Madelin expressed concerns that a controversy similar to one in the U.S. in 2000 could erupt in Europe. Known as the StarLink case, that controversy took place when it emerged that a GM corn used in taco shells for Mexican dishes had not been authorised for human consumption. StarLink, as the corn was named, was instead only permitted as animal feed and for industrial purposes like ethanol manufacture.

According to Madelin, similar issues may arise in Europe if biotech firms do not provide complete details of all GM ingredients in any foods they wish to introduce. He therefore recommended that all information provided when applying for approvals should be comprehensive. This advice was provided as part of his desire to see "loyal cooperation" between industry and the Commission, he said.

Marco Contiero, an agriculture campaigner with Greenpeace, said it is to be expected that senior officials would advise companies on how to respect EU rules. Yet he argued that Madelin's support for biotech firms went beyond providing advice. Madelin, he said, had been instrumental in having the Amflora potato file endorsed by the Commission.

Frédéric Vincent, a Commission spokesman, claimed there is "nothing secret or hidden" about how EU officials have a close relationship with biotech firms. Vincent added that Brussels officials are hoping to bring forward a plan within the next few months on giving EU governments greater flexibility in deciding if they wish to allow GM crops on their territory. "The Commission is just doing its job" in consulting with business, he said.

The European Food Safety Authority based in Parma, Italy has also been counselling biotech firms on how they should present applications for new crop approvals. In 2008, EFSA's director Catherine Geslain-Lanéelle wrote to EuropaBio urging that any bids should be flanked with the most up-to-date scientific information "in order to avoid unnecessary delays" in having them processed.

EFSA has been accused by ecological activists of being biased in favour of GM foods and of not assessing their likely effects with sufficient rigour.

In April, the German green organisation TestBiotech complained that EFSA had not studied the likely effects of a maize patented as Bt 1507 by the company Pioneer on butterflies and other common insects. Since then, EFSA has finalised new guidelines on risk assessment. According to TestBiotech spokesman Christoph Then, these guidelines are a "slight improvement" on those previously followed but will still mean that the factors taken into account are "too narrow".

One major flaw, said Contiero of Greenpeace, is that the guidelines do not address what can happen if a plant or animal has its genetic structure altered through exposure to two separate GM organisms. "This is not like selling a car with two different seats: a yellow and a black one," Contiero said. "What we are talking about is like having an entirely new car. Yet EFSA's approach is that this would not be subject to a risk assessment. This is absolutely crazy." (END/2010)